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## **Leadership is the key to sustainable schools**

*Justin Dillon*

'Multiple sources of evidence now show that being a sustainable school raises standards and enhances well-being'. So said the Department for Education in 2010. So why hasn't every school adopted sustainability lock, stock and water barrel? The answer comes down to leadership, pure and simple – or lack of it in many cases.

The DfE report, 'Evidence of Impact of Sustainable Schools' explained that sustainable schools engaged young people in their learning which led to improvements in motivation and behavior. They also promoted healthy school environments and lifestyles, and they advanced community cohesion by making valuable connections between the school and its parents, carers and the wider community. These are all highly desirable outcomes and, given the increasing flexibility that school leaders have these days, you would expect every school to be looking at how to become more sustainable.

The DfE report provides '15 top tips' grouped under five themes ranging from making sustainability a strong focus of the school development plan to involving young people in developing and modelling sustainable school practices. A key recommendation was to involve young people in outdoor learning which, again, is a practice which varies widely from school to school.

There is little difference between sustainability education, education for sustainability (EfS) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The latter term is, though, rather more contentious in that it uses the term sustainable development which some might see as a bit of a fudge – how can development be sustained in a way which conserves the environment. I doubt whether many teachers in England would know that we've just lived through a Decade of ESD. UNESCO approved the Decade (2005-2014) as a way of responding to urgent environmental concerns but it had little impact not just in England but elsewhere. Nowadays UNESCO is promoting 'Climate Change Education for Sustainable Development' with equally limited success.

One reason for the lack of impact of UNESCO's decade is that there is no shortage of organisations willing to promote sustainability education and outdoor learning. Some might say we have too many organisations and every now and again someone tries to harness their collective resources for the greater good. A first point of call, perhaps, might be SEEd (Sustainability and Environmental Education) which emerged in 2007 and has been running courses and lobbying for changes to the National Curriculum to promote sustainability ever since. SEEd organises an annual National Sustainable Schools Conference which usually attracts 100-200 practitioners and school teachers.

The Council for learning Outside the Classroom (CLOtC), founded in 2008, formally assumed responsibility and leadership for learning outside the classroom from the [then] Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)

several months later. The Council supported the development of commitments made in response to the LOtC Manifesto which had been launched by the government in 2006. CLOtC's 'Out and About Package' provided support to schools and education providers through a website and through the LOtC Quality Badge which is a national accreditation scheme that recognises organisations that provide good quality educational experiences and which manage risk effectively. Both SEEd and the CLOtC provide access to curriculum advice and resources as well as link to a host of education providers including the Wildlife Trusts, the RSPB, the Field Studies Council and many other environmental and outdoor education organisations with much longer histories and in most cases greater resources.

Despite the accessibility of high quality teaching resources, expert advice and guidance, world-leading residential centres and local and regional nature reserves, what happens in school varies considerably. In 2009 Ofsted published a report on ESD based on visits they had made to eight primary, one special and five secondary schools over a three-year period. Not surprisingly the primary schools had made better progress than the secondary schools towards becoming sustainable. Encouragingly, however, pupils in all the schools showed increases in their knowledge and understanding of the importance of leading more sustainable lives. Sustainability was an integral element of a well planned curriculum in the most successful schools. In those schools all staff, 'not just a dedicated few', took responsibility for promoting sustainability. Students were provided with opportunities to engage in a wide range of practical activities in and out of the classroom. In some schools, students were able to initiate their own projects for improving sustainability. Ofsted reported that the pupils 'reacted very positively to being able to work collaboratively, to conduct research and to take part in debates and discussion'. Outcomes included more positive attitudes to learning, better behaviour and attendance, and improved standards and achievement. In terms of pedagogy, the schools emphasized discussion, creative thinking and persuasive writing.

My feeling is that we already have good evidence that a focus on sustainability in schools is both achievable and desirable. What I would like us to do is to move beyond focusing on recycling and improving school grounds, which are worth activities, to a more holistic approach to the curriculum which mean that when students were asked why they were studying a particular subject would answer 'I'm learning how to address the major problems facing the world'. ESD version 2.0 perhaps?

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